

We Return to God



To Parents:

This booklet is designed to help you prepare your child for Confession. We recommend that you read the entire booklet yourself before going through its contents with your child. After your child has participated in the Sacrament several times, he can make the necessary preparation himself with the aid of this booklet. Parents may find it necessary, however, to periodically remind the child to prepare for Confession and provide the conditions to make it possible for the child to have a quiet time and place to do this. Above all, it is important that a loving, understanding attitude be part of the parents' role in assisting the child to receive this Sacrament. An absence of fear and an assurance of trust in God as a loving Father who wants to forgive us are the best conditions for leading a child to the Sacrament of Penance.

We Return to God

*A Manual for
Preparing Children for the
Sacrament of Penance*

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To the Parents

Your child is now at the stage of religious development when he/she is being introduced to Confession which is the Sacrament of Penance. It is essential that you, the parents, understand the meaning of this unique event and help your child in preparing for it.

1. *Why is the Sacrament of Penance needed?*

Penance is necessary because each one of us constantly *sins*, i.e. betrays and rejects the grace of Christian life given us in Baptism. Sins separate us from God, darken our consciousness, undermine our will, make us slaves of passions, moods, temptations. And just as we must wash ourselves in order to be clean, we must repent for our sins, acknowledge them before God, receive His forgiveness and have a "new start" — in peace with Him and with our fellow men.

2. *Why should we confess our sins to the Priest and not simply to God Himself?*

Because it is from and through the Church that we receive the knowledge of God and His Commandments, the grace of salvation and the joy of new life, and, it is the Priest who represents the Church. He has received, through ordination, the power "to loose and to bind." A real repentance begins with overcoming our shame. The Priest can help us to detect sins of which we are not aware. He can, in Christ's name, absolve our sins and reconcile us with the Church. Finally, he must instruct us in God's ways after we have decided to lead a better life.

3. *How should we prepare ourselves for Confession?*

By evaluating our daily life, our thoughts and acts, our desires and our imaginations in the light of Christ's commandments; by asking God to help us in seeing our own sins; by "repenting" — i.e. regretting our evil deeds and desiring to change and to improve our lives; by concentrating our minds on the ultimate goal and meaning of life: salvation for life eternal in and with God.

4. *What is the unique significance of the first Confession?*

The first confession means that the child has become capable of moral responsibility for his acts and can fulfill the main commandment which is to discern between what is good and what is evil. If properly prepared for it, the child will always remember that a Christian must always *choose* the right way, fight the evil and refer his whole behavior to God's commandments.

5. *How can the parents help prepare the child for the first Confession?*

By helping the child to ask the questions about his life: about praying, being good to other people, selfishness, disobedience, etc.; by creating at home an atmosphere of peace and concentration (no TV set, etc.); by reading together with the child selected passages from the Gospel; and by helping him to "organize" his confession.

In the following pages, there is an introduction to the Sacrament of Penance for the child. It includes some selected passages from Scripture that present essential attitudes for repentance, forgiveness, etc. In addition, there are selected prayers that can be said before Confession, and before and after receiving Holy Communion. Finally, there are some practical guides for the preparation for Confession and for the Rite of Confession itself. You may help your child to read this material and to prepare for his first and subsequent confessions, until such time as he is able to do the reading and preparing for Confession himself.

FATHER ALEXANDER SCHMEMANN

Coming to God

Do you remember the first time you realized that you had done something wrong? How did you feel? Most of us, when we do something wrong, want to correct it right away. We feel very bad as long as we know things aren't just right. If we have hurt or angered someone else, we want him to forgive us. If we have disobeyed our parents, we want them still to love us. But usually, it is up to us to make things right again. It is up to us to say, "I'm sorry" or "forgive me" or to admit we were wrong. The wonderful thing that usually happens when we do admit our wrongs is that things *are* made right again. We do feel again that things are good and that we really do live together with other people in love.

The person who loves us more than anyone else is God. He loves us more than we can ever know. He never stops loving us, even if we stop loving Him or forget to live in a good way as His children. But God does want us to be *good* children; He does want us to obey Him and to love others as He loves us.

Jesus used many stories to tell people how much God loves them and wants to forgive them when they behave badly. He showed us how God helps us to come back to Him after we have forgotten Him or forgotten to live as His children. These stories of Jesus are read in Church from the Holy Gospel just before Great Lent begins. They help us to remember how God wants us to live so that we can try again during Lent to return to God's life. These are the lessons, if you want to read them in your Bible:

1. The story of *Zacchaeus*, the small man who really *wanted to see Christ*. He was a rich tax collector and was not well liked. But he wanted so much to see Jesus, he climbed a tree to get a better look, even though this probably made him look foolish to other people. Christ saw him and came to his house. Zacchaeus was sorry he had treated others badly. He promised to give half of his money and goods to the poor and to repay four times anyone whom he had cheated. Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house." (LUKE 19:1-10)

2. The story of the *Publican and the Pharisee*, the *humble sinner* and the *proud man*. In this story, Jesus shows us the picture of two men. The Pharisee was a proud man who was very pleased with himself because he followed all the rules of the Church and bragged to God about how good he was. The Publican who was a sinner, knew how bad he was and simply said to God: "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" Jesus tells us that only the man who knows he has sinned and asks God to forgive him will be given a place in heaven. (LUKE 18:9-14)
3. The story of the *Prodigal Son*, who *returned to his father*, after he realized that he had wasted his money and sinned against God and his father. In this story, Jesus compares the Prodigal Son and his father to our life with God our Father. Only if we see how we have wasted the gifts God has given to us, only if we are sorry that we have sinned against God and other men, can we finally return to God ourselves. We must return to God our Father and confess our sinfulness. But God, just as the father of the Prodigal Son, truly loves us and is waiting to welcome us back to give us a place in His Kingdom. (LUKE 15:11-32)

4. The story of the *Last Judgment*, where God will judge all of us according to how much *love* we have shown to other men. Jesus tells us that we must treat everyone with love, just as we would treat Jesus Himself if He came to us. Those who are good and kind to all men, even strangers, will be welcomed into God's Kingdom. If we are not good to others, we shall face His judgment and eternal punishment. (MATTHEW 25:31-46)
5. The lesson on *Forgiveness* in which Jesus tells us that we must *forgive each other* as God forgives us, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you." In this lesson, He tells us also to fast "in secret" — in such a way that we do not "show off" that we are fasting. God knows all that we do and will reward us if we do His will. (MATTHEW 6:14-21)

In these few lessons, we learn what is important if we wish to *return to God*. We must:

1. Really want to be with God and try to live as His good children.
2. Try to see how we have sinned and be ready to confess our sins to God.
3. Try to understand that God wants us to be with Him, to enjoy His love and all good things He has created for us. And, when we have forgotten God and behaved badly, to return to Him in the Sacrament of Penance (Confession), to ask Him to forgive us and welcome us back into His love.
4. Try to treat everyone with kindness and love, so that at the Final Judgment, God will choose to have us with Him in His Heavenly Kingdom.
5. Try to forgive others, as we would like God to forgive us, and obey the commandments of God.

In Confession, you will be coming to God to tell Him you are sorry for sinning against Him and against other people. God will welcome you and receive you with love. He will welcome you back into His House. He will give you the food of new life, in Holy Communion, so that you may live forever with Him in His Kingdom.

In the next few pages, you will find questions to help you think about how well or how badly you have behaved. You will find prayers that should be said before Confession, and prayers that should be said before and after receiving Holy Communion. These can be read together with other members of your family who are preparing for Confession and Communion. Most importantly, try to spend enough time quietly by yourself, or with your parents, preparing for your Confession. In this way, you will be easily able to tell God and the priest how you have behaved, and the priest, in turn, will be better able to help you to live a better life as a good child of God.

Preparing for Confession

These are some of the things you can do to get ready before coming to Confession:

1. Think about how you have behaved, what you have done wrong, and how you can be better. Use the list of *Questions to Think About* to help you remember how you may have disobeyed God and your family and friends. Do not use the list only; try to look at your own life to see other ways in which you may have sinned.
2. Read, if you can, the *Prayers before Confession* — at home or in Church.
3. When you come to the Church, first say your prayers, then wait for the priest to come out to hear your confession. The priest will stand by a table on which there will be a Gospel or a Cross, or both. Go up to the priest, kiss the Gospel and Cross. The

priest will tell you in a few words how he wants you to confess your sins. Try to remember the *main ways* in which you have been disobedient or have behaved badly. When you are finished, the priest will talk to you and help you to see how you can live in a better way.

4. When you have nothing more to confess and have asked God to forgive you, then kneel before the table. The Priest will place his *epitrakhil* (stole) on your head and pray to God to forgive you for your sins. After he has finished the prayer and made the blessing upon your head, stand, make the sign of the Cross and kiss the Gospel or Cross again. The priest will give you his blessing and you can then return to your place in the Church.

Questions to Think About before Coming to Confession

A few days or at least the evening before we come to Confession, we should sit down and carefully think about the ways in which we have behaved toward God, toward our family and friends, and even toward ourselves. As we look at our lives, we should try to keep in mind the ways in which we have sinned — if we have been disobedient, if we have hurt or angered others, or if we have done anything which would keep us away from God's love and God's life.

Here are some questions which you can ask yourself; try to see the ways in which you have behaved well or badly.

I. How have I behaved towards God?

Did I pray to Him everyday?

Did I thank Him? — in the morning, at meals, in the evening, or whenever I remembered how good He has been to me?

Have I used words which use the Name of God in a bad way?

Have I really loved God and tried to live as He wants me to live, or do I easily forget Him and forget to follow His Commandments?

II. How have I behaved towards my family and friends?

Have I remembered my family, my friends and all people who need God in my prayers?

Have I been good to my parents and given them my love? Have I been honest with them and answered them truthfully whenever they asked me something? Or, have I lied to them? Have I been stubborn or disrespectful? Have I become angry? Have I disobeyed them? Have I been kind to my grandparents and to older people?

Have I been good to my brothers or sisters? Have I shared my things with them? Or, have I been selfish and taken everything for myself? Have I helped them? Have I done my share of my duties at home? Have I been mean to them or teased them?

Have I been good to my friends and teachers? Have I become angry, or selfish, or disrespectful? Have I taken something which doesn't belong to me? Have I been lazy in my schoolwork, or have I cheated in my work? Have I tried to help someone, even in some small way? Have I made fun of anyone? Have I tried to make new students feel at home, or, have I ignored them and played only with my old friends? Have I tried to make friends with someone who is lonely and doesn't have many friends?

Have I spoken badly about someone else? Have I been mean to anyone? Have I told lies about myself or about others?

Have I used in a good way the things that God, my family and friends have given to me? Have I treated my pets and other animals well? Have I treated other people's property in a good way?

III. How have I behaved towards myself?

Have I been responsible? — have I done things that other people have asked me to do: at home, in school, with groups of other people?

Have I boasted (or thought) about being better than other people?

Have I taken the advice from my parents and teachers about how to treat my own body in a good way — by getting enough sleep, eating the right kind of food, etc.

Am I often angry? Do I often want everything for myself? Am I jealous of other people? Am I lazy or stubborn?

Finally . . .

Am I truly sorry for my sins? Am I truly sorry for hurting others? Do I forgive others for hurting me?

Do I really *want to change* my habits and behave as God wants me to behave? Do I know what I must do to live in a better way as a good child of God?

Do I really know that God loves me and will help me change if I want to? Do I really believe that God is good and will forgive me and be with me?

Prayers before Confession

(Before you come to confess your sins to the Priest, you should say these prayers as part of your preparation for Confession. Sometimes these prayers may be said together in the Church if a group of people are going to Confession on the same day; if this is done, the Priest will usually lead you in your prayers.)

Priest: Blessed is our God always, now and ever and unto ages of ages.

(If there is no priest, begin by saying:
In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.)

AMEN.

O heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth who art everywhere and fillest all things. Treasury of Blessings, and Giver of Life: Come and abide in us, and cleanse us from every impurity, and save our souls, O Good One.

Holy God! Holy Mighty! Holy Immortal!
Have mercy on us.

Holy God! Holy Mighty! Holy Immortal!
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Holy God! Holy Mighty! Holy Immortal!
Have mercy on us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. AMEN.

O most-holy Trinity: have mercy on us.

O Lord: cleanse us from our sins.

O Master: pardon our transgressions.

O Holy One: visit and heal our infirmities, for Thy name's sake.

Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. AMEN.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.

Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Priest: For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory: of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages.

AMEN.

Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us, for laying aside all excuse, we sinners offer to Thee, as to our Master, this request: have mercy on us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.

O Lord, have mercy on us, for in Thee have we put our trust. Do not be angry with us, nor remember our wicked deeds, but look down on us even now, since Thou art compassionate, and deliver us from our enemies; for Thou art our God, and we are Thy people; we are all the work of Thy hands, and we call on Thy name.

Now and ever and unto ages of ages. AMEN.

O blessed Theotokos, open the doors of compassion to us whose hope is in you, that we may not perish but be delivered from adversity through you, who are the salvation of the Christian people.

You may also read PSALM 51 in your Bibles.

Preparing for Holy Communion

1. Before you receive Holy Communion, you may read the *Prayers before Holy Communion* by yourself or with members of your family. Remember that you are to fast from the evening before and try to be at peace with all your family and friends. During this time, you can also think about how to live a better life, remembering the words of advice that the Priest gave to you.
2. After you have attended the Divine Liturgy and have received God's gift of Holy Communion, say a prayer of thanks to God, or read, if you can, at least one of the *Prayers of Thanksgiving* (in Church or at home). And most importantly, *begin* now to try to live a good life as one of God's children.

Prayers before Holy Communion

(After you have confessed your sins to the Priest, you may read the prayers on pages 24-25 (through "Our Father") as part of your preparation for Holy Communion. In addition, you should fast from the evening before, and be at peace with all your family and friends before you receive Holy Communion.)

Then, before coming to Communion say:

I believe, O Lord, and I confess that Thou art truly the Christ, the Son of the Living God, who camest into the world to save sinners, of whom I am first.

I believe also that this is truly Thine own most pure Body, and that this is truly Thine own precious Blood.

Therefore, I pray Thee; have mercy upon me and forgive my transgressions both voluntary and involuntary, of word and of deed, committed knowingly and unknowingly, of knowledge and of ignorance.

And make me worthy to partake without condemnation of Thy most pure Mysteries, for the remission of my sins, and unto life everlasting. AMEN.

Of Thy Mystical Supper, O Son of God, accept me today as a communicant; for I will not speak of Thy Mystery to Thine enemies, neither like Judas will I give Thee a kiss; but like the thief will I confess Thee:

Remember me, O Lord, in Thy Kingdom.

May the communion of Thy holy Mysteries be neither to my judgment, nor to my condemnation, O Lord, but to the healing of soul and body.

AMEN.

Prayers of Thanksgiving

(There are many prayers that can be said to thank God for giving us the gifts of new life in Holy Communion. Here are three prayers which you can say:)

O Master, Christ our God, King of the Ages,
Maker of all things:

I thank Thee for all the good things Thou hast
given me,
especially for the communion with Thy most
pure and life-creating Mysteries.

I pray Thee, O gracious Lover of Man:
preserve me under Thy protection, beneath
the shadow of Thy wings.

Enable me, even to my last breath, to par-
take worthily and with a pure conscience
of Thy holy things,

for the remission of sins and unto life eter-
nal.

For Thou art the Bread of Life, the Fountain
of Holiness, the Giver of all Good;

to Thee we ascribe glory, with the Father and
the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto
ages of ages. AMEN.

O Lord Jesus Christ our God: let Thy holy
Body be my eternal life;
Thy precious Blood, my remission of sins.
Let this Eucharist be my joy health, and
gladness.
Make me, a sinner, worthy to stand on the
right hand of Thy glory at Thine awesome
second Coming,
through the prayers of Thy most pure Mother
and of all the saints. AMEN.

We thank Thee
O Master who lovest mankind,
Benefactor of our souls,
that Thou hast made us worthy this day
of Thy heavenly and immortal mysteries.

Make straight our path;
strengthen us all in Thy fear;
guard our life;
make firm our steps;

through the prayers and intercessions
of the glorious Theotokos and ever-virgin
Mary, and of all Thy saints. Amen.